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The City as a Tangled Bank

Urban Design vs Urban Evolution

TERRY FARRELL

WILEY



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Terry Farrell, London, April 2013

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Preface

As I sit down to write this book, I reflect on the fact that writing is not my primary activity; it is not something that I do every day. I am not a professional writer; I am a practitioner. The world of academia, of writing, researching and teaching, is something I only touch on and connect with now and then.

I spend my days in meetings, on site and drawing. I meet with my own staff in design and planning reviews, sketching, doodling and talking, with sheets of paper on the tables – some tracing, some blank – and plans, photos and Google maps on the walls, and bits of models everywhere. I walk around sites, town centres, cities, with a purpose, with a project, with a challenge of a physical kind. Increasingly I am in big workshops where, for some or all of the time, every player is present: town planners; local politicians; engineers of all kinds – traffic, civil, structural; landscapers; and, increasingly, other architects, because collaboration has become much more acceptable. It is something I have always done, but it is increasingly the norm. There is always of course my home team in these workshops, various external project managers working for all sides, and ever more often the clients are there as professionals, as hands-on people replicating the other disciplines of town planning, engineering and construction. Sometimes and increasingly there are even professional architects within the client body. In this way there is a community, layering their work and, in so doing, replicating city making at large – not by the hand of a single designer, but by a collective. This is

still 'design', though through a more complex evolutionary process. And the resultant city is all the better for it. To paraphrase Charles Darwin, it can display qualities of grandeur, wonder and beauty, because the city's own life force always predominates.¹

In all of this I like to think I am not only action-orientated; I am not only doing the planning, designing and building of things. At the same time I am also evolving thoughts and ideas, coming to wider conclusions of a general theoretical nature, and of course, just as with all people of action, I am coming to these conclusions in a different way from the specialist, single-purpose building designer or the more removed academics, writers and theoreticians. When I sit down to write or research a book or an article, I discover more and more about the parallel universe I am in. I begin to realise that, while I think I have 'discovered' afresh what I have learnt, what I have observed, and the general conclusions I have reached, in fact all I have done is discover them for myself within our wider culture. I realise there is a parallel world of theoreticians, writers and researchers who are all professionally involved in these specific areas, and invariably they have all worked it out before me, thoroughly, eruditely and well.

So to what extent is my writing of value in the face of such serious professional writing by others? Well, I believe the work of a practitioner has its own contribution to make to research, theory and writing. I have become passionate about cross connections because I am doing and observing. I see myself as something of a detective, like Sherlock Holmes. When working at the urban terrain, I take the view that everything is where it is for a reason – but not necessarily for the particular purpose it has assumed. Another analogy I use is that the architect-planner should be like a city psychoanalyst, with the city 'on the couch'. As Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, wrote: 'There is, in fact, no better analogy for repression by which something in the mind is at once made inaccessible and preserved, than burial of the sort to which Pompeii fell victim and from which it could emerge once more through the work of spades.'² So the architect-planner needs to engage with evolution, layering and the everyday in a manner that the urban designer traditionally does not. What is the history of a place? Why is it here? What could it be? What does it tell you it wants to be? ... and so on. The tangle of the city does have patterns, and there is an order or relationships of orders underlying its form. This process is close to that of 'immersion' in the territory of city making, acknowledging the sheer scale and range of what needs to be absorbed in order to be able to prevail even in small ways. It is a bit like

joining a crowd, to understand what drives it, what its nature is, and if it is going anywhere or nowhere in particular. It is what the reformist leader of China's Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping, referred to as 'crossing the river by feeling the stones'.³ To be more removed in any way is to be self-limiting.

There is a connection between 'immersion' and 'thinking and doing'. What I do as an architect-planner every day does not compare to the fortitude, the bravery, the exposure to a wilder, riskier world of Darwin and the era of the great, naturalist explorers of the 18th and 19th centuries. They crossed the globe in little galleons blown across uncharted seas, encountering natives and wild animals, oceans and dangers, with limited maps and communication aids, and yet collected all manner of creatures and brought them back so they could form observations and theories about the nature of our world and its meaning. What an extraordinary combination of doing and thinking began this journey of discovery that underlies evolutionary theory and modern biology. Is there any better advocacy for the idea that thinking and doing should be interrelated?

'Immersion' for Darwin was so much more total than is possible in today's world of connectivity and communications technology. At Down House in Kent, where he settled after all his voyages and which remained his home for 40 years until his death, there is a re-creation of his domestic environment, his walk in the woods where he went to think, his garden and greenhouses where he studied plants and animals, in a world deliberately self-limiting and focused to the extent that he became obsessed by the minutiae of worms and their contribution to understanding the scale relationships of the micro to the macro. Like the camera zoom in Charles and Ray Eames's short film *Powers of Ten* (1977), Darwin ranged from the seas and the globe to his back garden, the soil and the micro-subterranean life. There is a part of the museum now at Down House that captures this scale range. On the first floor is a re-creation of his cabin on the *Beagle*; a tiny space in a tiny ship that he shared with others, in which he kept and studied his collected specimens as he voyaged. It was his complete world for so many weeks and months, tossed perilously around but enclosed and isolated from a vast hostile external expanse like a capsule on a modern-day moon rocket.

And of course Darwin – unlike astronauts in space shuttles, or the Eameses in *Powers of Ten* – was not just travelling spatially. In his exploration he was travelling through time – deep, deep time. His studies of volcanic rocks on the Galápagos Islands and coral layers on ocean reefs, and the accompanying

journeys of plant and animal evolution, led him to speculate on the connecting up of not only place and habitat, but also of time elements. In the same way, with the human habitat – homes, neighbourhoods and public gathering areas ranging from the primitive ages even to the new inventions of 20th-century towns and cities – time is fundamental to the evolution of a place and its present reality. The voluntary eclipse of the time dimension of modern city planning – as Peter Hall depicts so well in his description of the original intent for Brasília as being ‘to create a totally new built form as a shell for a new society, without reference to history: the past was simply to be abolished’⁴ – was nonsensical at best and destructive at worst. The denial of time, as Colin Fournier writes, was one of the Modern movement’s greatest mistakes:

In the same way that it attempted to place itself outside contingent space and sought to replace it by ideal space, Modernism also endeavoured to place itself outside time, on the timeless tabula rasa of the avant-garde, cut off from the past.

Paradoxically, this uncompromising commitment to the ‘here and now’ leads to being neither here nor now: ignoring the passage of time, by not acknowledging that we are living a chronological palimpsest of successive layers, time is deprived of its essence and of the necessary unpredictability of change.⁵

Some of the great architect-urbanists have lived in the same place where they carried out their most notable works – Otto Wagner in Vienna, John Nash in London, Jože Plečnik in Ljubljana, Carlo Scarpa in Venice and Karl Friedrich Schinkel in Berlin. It needs immersion to absorb and read, to act-think-act-think in a continuum of daily life. The inspiration for probably the most important urban thinker of the last half century, Jane Jacobs, was undoubtedly New York – its neighbourhoods, but particularly its sidewalks. In her words:

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intimacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations.⁶

Jan Gehl of Copenhagen has continued the urbanist tradition of immersion – and of sidewalks in particular (see chapter 3). The relationship between the learning and understanding of the particular and its extrapolation to universal relevance for all cities have made Jane Jacobs's writing and Gehl's designs of relevance to all cities everywhere.

The connection between immersion and understanding place reaps many benefits, as I have realised personally having now been in the Paddington/Marylebone area of London, both living and working for well over 40 years. So this book will explore these kinds of issues from the point of view of an immersive practitioner and not a specialist writer or researcher. It will define the distinct natures of architecture and planning (see chapter 1), and the ways in which the disciplines relate – or fail to relate – to one another (see chapter 2). It will make observations and suggestions about what an urban designer can bring to city making with his ego and confidence, and in contrast what the urban planner can bring with his wider involvement but innate overexposure to so many influences. And, in particular through proposing the notion of urban activism (see chapter 8), it will suggest how the 'architect-planner', with an appreciation of both sides of the theoretical debate and the experience of practice, might have a role to play in future city making.